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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: AOUN DEFENDS HIS POSITION, CRITICIZES
SINIORA AND MARCH 14

REF: BEIRUT 1338

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) In a 4/29 meeting, the Ambassador shared USG concerns about Iran, Syria, and Hizballah with presidential aspirant and MP Michel Aoun. Aoun denied being a tool of any of the three. The USG, in his view, should welcome the alliances he has made with Hizballah and pro-Syrian politicians. On the one hand, he has "pacified" Hizballah, he said, attributing the lack of any serious Blue Line attacks by Hizballah in 2006 to the understanding he concluded with Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. On the other hand, he has rehabilitated pro-Syrian Lebanese, with their allegiance to him preferable to their previous links to Damascus. Fouad Siniora is a failed prime minister and a failed politician, Aoun insisted, and his cabinet should be brought. Aoun neither denied nor confirmed the rumors that he would back street protests to topple the government, but he described the social and economic situation in the country as "becoming unbearable." In his view, Siniora's reform plan must be fought, as it would worsen, not improve, the situation. While somewhat gentler than usual on Druse leader Walid Jumblatt, Aoun criticized the March 14 movement generally and Saad Hariri more specifically. When asked if there was any hope of bridging the gap between March 14 and his bloc for the sake of Lebanon, Aoun rejected working with "dictators" who "refuse to share power." If March 14 wanted to reach out to him, they could invite him to name the Christian cabinet ministers in a new government. (See reftel for Aoun's comments on the 4/28 session of the National Dialogue.) End summary.

AMBASSADOR EXPRESSES CONCERNS
ABOUT AOUN'S FRIENDS AND ALLIES

12. (S) On 4/29, the Ambassador met one-on-one with Aoun. Noting that he had been in Washington the previous week, the Ambassador shared with Aoun growing U.S. concerns about three overlapping problems in Lebanon: 1) Growing Iranian influence through Hizballah, increased Iranian funding to radical Palestinians, and Iranian support for Sunni extremists in Lebanon's impoverished north. 2) The seeming resurgence of Syrian interference in Lebanon, manifested most clearly in the reemergence into public view, after a year's disappearance, of Syria's most notorious Lebanese stooges. 3) The refusal of Hizballah to disarm and its continuation of a "state within a state" presence that weakens Lebanon.

13. (S) The Ambassador noted that he was deeply concerned that Aoun seemed to be implicated in all three of these issues through his alliance with Hizballah and the ever more strident pledges of allegiance to Aoun from pro-Syrian politicians who remain close to Damascus. The Ambassador emphasized that the USG is not backing personalities in Lebanon or taking sides in domestic political battles. But the USG stands firmly behind certain principles -- democracy, freedom, independence, sovereignty, reform -- that Aoun's allies seem to mock. Noting Aoun's previous support of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act and UNSCR 1559, the Ambassador commented that, if one has an old friend, but that old friend suddenly hangs out only with crooks and thieves, one starts to question the honesty of one's friend.

AOUN CLAIMS TO BE NUDGING
THE PRO-SYRIANS TO PATRIOTISM

14. (S) Aoun responded that the USG underestimates him. He, too, stands for those principles of democracy and freedom for Lebanon and had done so consistently, while the USG still indulged Syria's occupation of Lebanon. "I am not a tool of the Syrians," he said, complaining that the March 14 majority is too quick to accuse anyone with a different perspective with that ugly charge. It is akin to being described as an anti-Semite, he said; how can one fight it without making oneself look worse? Moreover, Aoun said, all of the March 14 leaders had once been in Syria's pocket, which he never was. Rafiq Hariri was a tool of the Syrians. Aoun maintained his independence scrupulously, but the March 14 crowd is trying to rewrite history.

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15. (S) The Ambassador responded that accepting the endorsements of Suleiman Franjieh, Talal Arslan, Elie Ferzli, Assem Qanso, Wiam Wihab, Abdulrahim Murad, Omar Karami, and other pro-Syrians -- people who have not yet made the break with Damascus -- was hardly the best way to refute the pro-Syrian charges. The Ambassador noted that he himself wondered why such figures, all of whom oppose international efforts to support Lebanese freedom and democracy, are so eager for an Aoun presidency. Their comfort levels with Aoun give many people pause.

16. (S) Aoun said that, with the exception of Wihab ("definitely a Syrian agent, a gangster"), all of the others were, under Aoun's leadership, becoming Lebanese patriots. They will use their connections with Syria to help Lebanon, not to help themselves as the March 14 crowd had done with their own previously active Syrianties. The pro-Syrians are part of the Lebanese political scene. Some of them, like Karami and Franjieh, have legitimate following. They cannot simply be thrown out with the trash, as March 14 would like. Discarding them will backfire in a country with divisions as sharp as those in Lebanon. Ignoring them could lead to civil war. Instead of questioning his motives in accepting endorsements from the pro-Syrians, Aoun said, the USG should recognize that he alone is making these people more Lebanese in approach and harnessing their connections for Lebanon.

AOUN CLAIMS TO "PACIFY" HIZBALLAH

17. (S) The Ambassador turned to Hizballah, acknowledging that this is a topic that he had discussed with Aoun before. Noting the release of the 2005 Country Reports on Terrorism, the Ambassador noted in some detail Hizballah's arms inside Lebanon, its ability to bring Lebanon into war with Israel, its support for Palestinian and Iraqi violence, and its global reach. Hizballah's criminal activities, including drug smuggling and money laundering, stand in stark contrast to Aoun's calls for an end to corruption. The USG remains opposed to Aoun's written understanding with Nasrallah and

still wonder how Aoun could have been willing to provide cover to a criminal, terrorist organization that is so dangerous.

¶18. (S) Aoun responded by stressing two different themes. First, he said, the USG was hypocritical, criticizing him while accepting the March 14 informal alliance with Hizballah during the 2005 legislative elections. The Ambassador noted that, just as we objected to Aoun's written document, we have vigorously opposed some of Hariri and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's proposals vis-a-vis Hizballah. Aoun then noted that the Blue Line, while subject to "almost daily" Israeli violations, has been quiet from the Lebanese side in 2006. Hizballah's restraint, he said, is due entirely to the written understanding with Aoun. As Hizballah needs Aoun more than Aoun needs Hizballah, Aoun is able to exercise control over Hizballah's activities, control for which the USG should be grateful.

¶19. (S) When the Ambassador asked whether the National Dialogue might account for the lack of Hizballah attacks along the Blue Line, Aoun took credit for the Dialogue as well, claiming that he proposed it first. The Ambassador noted that Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah had made some particularly alarming statements lately, hinting at using kidnapping to release Lebanese detainees from Israeli prisons and freely admitting that Hizballah supports Palestinian terrorist organizations. Aoun dismissed Nasrallah's rhetoric as unimportant.

¶10. (S) What is happening on the ground, Aoun said, is more important than Nasrallah's words. And what is happening is "pacification" (a word he returned to frequently) of Hizballah. The U.S. insistence on Hizballah disarmament will never come about by force, Aoun insisted, and any international military strikes will just make it harder to disarm Hizballah. So, for lack of anything better, the USG should support and be thankful for Aoun's pacification efforts, which are already bearing fruit. In terms of property distribution, Aoun said, the Christians and Shia together have 80 percent of the Lebanese territory, including sensitive border areas with Israel and Syria. "Pacification" will mean that those areas will stay quiet. Asked by the Ambassador what his long-term vision was for Hizballah, Aoun said that Hizballah's weapons must be brought into a national defense strategy and put under the control of national forces. He did not comment on Hizballah's international

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activities, describing them as "rumors."

AOUN WANTS SINIORA TO QUIT

¶11. (S) The Ambassador asked Aoun why he so bitterly attacked Prime Minister Siniora, when it seemed as though Lebanon should embrace the fact that there is a secular Sunni leadership in Lebanon that has broad international support that Lebanon needs. Aoun -- displaying anger and impatience for the first time in the conversation -- described Siniora as a failure. He was a failure as finance minister under Rafiq Hariri, and Lebanon now suffers under a crushing debt burden because of Siniora. The corruption that Siniora now claims to want to fight took root under Siniora's nose, and Siniora's masters benefitted. He has also proven to be a failure as a politician. It is time for him to go. The Ambassador asked whether the rumors were true that Aoun would use the street in an attempt to topple Siniora's cabinet. Aoun said that he hoped Siniora would soon resign. But, if he did not, the situation was becoming "desperate." Who knows, Aoun asked, what desperate people might do. Aoun did not answer when the Ambassador asked who might do better than Siniora in the current environment.

AOUN DISMISSES SINIORA'S REFORM PLAN
AS FLAWED; REFUSES TO CONSIDER TAX HIKES

¶12. (S) The social and economic situation in Lebanon is "becoming unbearable," Aoun continued. Siniora and his cabinet are to blame for ignoring the fact that salaries don't cover basic expenses, that the systems of education and medical care are crumbling, and that Lebanon's youth emigrate rather than face certain unemployment at home. The Ambassador noted that Siniora's reform plan, the outlines of which have IMF and international support, aims to address the structural deficiencies that cause the problems Aoun described.

¶13. (S) Aoun disagreed: Siniora's plan is a disaster, full of failed ideas that Lebanon just barely avoided implementing after Paris II. Taking the steps Siniora proposes would worsen, not improve, people's lives. Aoun pledged to use his supporters to bloc Siniora's reform plan. The Ambassador urged Aoun to look more carefully at what Siniora was suggesting, which strikes us as a good start. Aoun noted that Siniora had sent Minister of Economy and Trade Sami Haddad and Minister of Finance Jihad Azour to see him a few days earlier to go through the plan. Haddad and Azour struck Aoun as well-intentioned but as extremely naive when it comes to politics. The Lebanese will fight rather than accept new taxes, Aoun vowed. The government should focus first on stopping corruption and providing help to those in need. Aoun noted his deep opposition to privatization plans in the telecom sector, arguing that the GOL needs the revenues. The Ambassador tried to counter that the private sector could bring better service to Lebanon at lower prices, but Aoun expressed his conviction that privatization was designed so that March 14 politicians could profit.

AOUN DOUBTFUL ABOUT RECONCILIATION
WITH MARCH 14 COALITION

¶14. (S) In closing, the Ambassador noted that the principles Aoun espouses -- freedom, democracy, independence, etc. -- were the same ones that the March 14 movement support. They coincide with international hopes for Lebanon. The only people who seem to reject those principles are Hizballah and the pro-Syrian Lebanese now allied with Aoun. The Ambassador asked whether, given the shared principles, Aoun could envision any reconciliation with the March 14 coalition. Aoun briefly described March 14 leaders, giving a somewhat more favorable than usual description of Jumblatt but dismissing Hariri ("a Wahabi dictator"), Samir Ja'ja' ("a criminal"), and "all the other Christian midgets." He spent considerable time outlining Hariri's alleged sins, accusing him of being a stalking horse for those who wish to marginalize Lebanon's Christians.

¶15. (S) The basic problem with March 14, Aoun said, is the refusal to share power. March 14 politicians insist on a monopoly, and Lebanon cannot be run by a monopoly. They are "dictators" who "refuse to share power." Aoun cannot work with such dictators, and he will increase his criticism in coming weeks. After all, if they wanted to reconcile with

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Aoun, they could bring him and his bloc into the cabinet. The Ambassador noted that the March 14 bloc has toyed with that very idea, but they worry that Aoun would insist on all twelve of the Christian cabinet seats, with Amal and Hizballah taking the five Shia seats. This would leave March 14 with only seven out of 24 cabinet seats -- the Sunnis and Druze -- not even enough for a blocking minority. "What's wrong with that?" Aoun asked, noting that his Christian support should give him the right to pick the Christian cabinet ministers. What is important for Lebanon to move forward, Aoun insisted, is a national unity government. And the only thing standing in the way of that is the March 14 coalition's insistence on maintaining a monopoly of power.

COMMENT

¶16. (S) With 20-20 hindsight, it is easy to argue that Siniora made a mistake in July 2005 in leaving Aoun and his and bloc -- alone among all parliamentary factions -- out of his cabinet. Left outside the government, Aoun has no incentive to see Siniora and cabinet succeed. Yet it is not as though inclusion in the cabinet has made the five Hizballah and Amal ministers enthusiastic supporters of Siniora: as the December-January Shia walk-out showed, inclusion in the cabinet does not mean someone is an ally. Whatever a national unity cabinet might have been able to do in 2005, bringing Aoun into the cabinet now will be more difficult than it would have been last summer. We are certain that Aoun's request for half the cabinet seats is simply an opening gambit, but, in any cabinet reshuffle, he and his allies will demand more than the one-third portion (8 portfolios) that Amal, Hizballah, and President Lahoud accepted as their collective share in July 2005. In Lebanon's confessional system, the cabinet acts like a mini-parliament, and most decisions of national importance require a two-thirds majority. If Amal, Hizballah, Aoun, and Lahoud had even nine rather than eight ministers, they could prevent a cabinet that is otherwise dominated by March 14 ministers from taking any significant decisions. If Aoun could be persuaded to vote with the March 14 ministers, then the balance changes. We still hope to persuade Aoun to move away from his more unsavory allies and to find an exit for Lebanon from its current political gridlock. But, based on this meeting with Aoun, we do not envision easy or quick construction of the bridges we hope to build between Aoun and the March 14 coalition.

FELTMAN